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**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER
GENERAL KEVIN BERGNER, SPOKESMAN AND DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF
FOR STRATEGIC EFFECTS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ VIA
CONFERENCE CALL FROM IRAQ
* TOPIC: OPERATIONAL UPDATE**

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD, PA):
Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable. Appreciate you being with us here this morning. And from the looks of things, you've got quite a bit for us this morning, I think.

GEN. BERGNER: Well, Jack, what we covered today in our normal weekly press conference is really sort of an operational update against -- about how we are working against the al Qaeda networks in Iraq. We talked in detail about the operations we've conducted over the last two months, in which if you just looked at the senior leader level of al Qaeda, about 26 high-value individuals. And as -- I know these guys; I won't go into a lot of detail because they know the nature of the threat over here. But both geographic and a functional focus -- 11 emirs, seven facilitators, five cell leaders, three VPID network leaders.

And so what we don't always do is we don't always put together the cumulative results of the effects we're achieving. We go out with results of our operations as soon as they're conducted or as soon as they're completed, as we can talk about them. So our focus today was to give folks a little bit better sense of the connectedness of those operations.

We also talked about the media cell that we disrupted up in Samarra and the scope and the scale of the media operations they were involved in. Without going into all the techno-geek numerology, but basically they were in a production mode of turning out about 156 CDs every eight hours and being able to distribute that across webs, across a variety of different electronic means.

And we also talked about a foreign fighter that we recently -- the Iraqi police actually recently detained on a bridge in Ramadi who was driving a thousand pounds of homemade explosives strapped to a semitruck. And we talked a little bit about what we learned from him, where -- how he had come through Syria to Iraq and how he was handled as a foreign fighter on that journey.

And then lastly I guess what I would point to is our operations against al Qaeda are being enabled by a significant increase in the number of tips we're receiving, something in the range of 23,000. We're also being enabled by these Awakening Support Councils that are standing up -- Awakenings in Anbar, Support Councils in Diyala and Salahuddin. And we're being enabled by things like the Ramadi covenant, which was a group of sheikhs who joined with the Iraqi police and army out in Ramadi and made a covenant, which, in tribal-speak, if you will, is a lifelong commitment to work against al Qaeda and to work with the Iraqi forces and their government. And so these are some really encouraging signs that the Iraqi people are turning away from the ideology and the violence of al Qaeda.

The other interesting data point is the Zawahiri video. And one of the points we made today is that Zawahiri, in his most recent video, refers to Iraq as "the gateway to victory," which says quite a bit about the centrality Iraq continues to have for the al Qaeda senior leadership. But in that same video, he also talked in some length about the disunity, about conspiracies and about discord and asked for more foreign fighters to come to Iraq, which is an interesting element in and of itself in terms of apparent concern and challenges that they perceive they're having, which we think are largely due to the kinds of things I just described.

So that's a quick update. We were focused on al Qaeda today and to give people a little bit more coherent sense of the effects our operations are having. And I'll be glad to take some questions.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Andrew, why don't you get started.

Q General Bergner, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from ON Point. I appreciate you taking the time, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: Sure.

Q Over the weekend I guess the big news -- you know, the usual horrible news of 220 deaths in Baghdad and in a little city up in the north -- was this AQI?

And if it wasn't AQI, then who do you think it was? Question.

GEN. BERGNER: Andrew, we're still -- we're still learning about the attack up in -- I think you're referring to the one in Armili, near the town of Tuz. That attack had all of the trappings of an al Qaeda attack. Our intelligence services are still considering it. I don't know that it has been claimed publicly as an al Qaeda attack. It was in a town that is largely Shi'ite and in a remote area southwest of Tuz. So, more to follow, really, on that, but it's interesting -- on the surface, it certainly has the appearance of the kind of attack that al Qaeda associates itself with.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: David Axe.

Q General, hi. David Axe. Thanks for taking the time out of your day.

You know, these tactical victories are sort of unsurprising at this point. But tell me this: How do we hold on to ground we've won? And I mean that in both a -- sort of a tactical sense, how do you literally hold on to territory that you've secured, but then also how do you shore up these victories against the networks and victories in the sense of mobilizing everyday Iraqis to sort of join the fight against al Qaeda? It seems like holding the ground, the literal and figurative ground, is harder than winning it in the first place.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. That's a great point. A couple of thoughts.

First of all, well, one of the things I learned in 2005 when I was here in Mosul was that a great deal of enduring success in Iraq comes at the local level, and so you -- we have to work closely with people at the local level to help them come up with the best solution to local problems. And that's very much a part of what is now under way. And these awakening councils, these support councils are centered on exactly that purpose. They are helping the tribal aspects of Iraqi society, the government at the provincial and village level, and the Iraqi security forces connect the dots among the three of them so that they are passing information to each other, so that the Iraqi government is providing not just political support but they're moving things, like we've seen in Baqubah, where they have moved 72 truckloads of food, 10 other truckloads of medical provisions.

So they have basically restocked the essential services in Diyala after al Qaeda having hijacked them.

That means an enormous amount to your basic Iraqi citizen. And that's what they need to see, in addition to what you described as the success against the network and the success in the tactical operations. They need to see some tangible improvements in their lives that comes on the heels of that and makes -- and improves their circumstance in life.

So we're helping on that level as well. And the reconstruction effort that we're now working on in Diyala province, particularly for Baqubah, is specifically intended to do what I just described.

We're also working on things like restoring the fuel shipments that had been hijacked and need to come from Baiji and other oil refineries to Diyala, to restore the availability of consumer fuels. That's what will knit this together. And it's -- and it really is very much a local phenomenon.

The other part of it, though, is enabling those who are courageous enough to take up arms against al Qaeda to actually have a role in the security forces. And so we are working closely with the government of Iraq. The prime minister has come out and had a supportive position on this. And they are now -- if you went to

Anbar, for example, you would see thousands of Iraqi young men queued up to join the police and to serve in their army. The numbers of police and the number of Iraqi young men in the army now is absolutely impressive. And if you looked at it this time last year, you would say, "What do we do to get this going? How do we find" -- because clearly you have to have young men that are willing to go out there and serve their country. That has changed as a result of these Anbar -- the Anbar awakening and the local level of support. Young -- sheikhs are now telling their young men, "Go join the security forces," as opposed to "Go fight the coalition."

So I -- that's a long answer to your question, but it is very much about improving the tangible -- tangible improvements in citizens' lives, and it's about connecting the dots between the security forces, their government and the population.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

Grim, how about you?

Q Good morning. General, this is Grim of Blackfive.net. I wanted to ask you a bit about something slightly different. There was a Time magazine article, written by Joe Klein, that argued that in addition to the two clocks General Petraeus talks about, there is a third clock, the broken Army clock, that is coming due and that the military will not be able to continue aggressive operations past April, no matter what. Can you speak to that issue for a little bit?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, I guess the first thing I would say is, our focus really is on -- being three weeks into this surge of operations, our focus is on exploiting and continuing to apply pressure simultaneously, not only in Baghdad but in the belts around Baghdad. And the force that we have on the ground now is uniquely enabling us to do that. We are being able to go after al Qaeda formations that are trying to get organized near Lake Habbaniya and go into what used to be safe havens or operating bases in Baqubah, at the same time that we're pressing south from Baghdad into Latifiyah and Yusufiya and Babil province and so forth.

That is helping us apply a level of pressure that we simply weren't able to achieve before, before deploying this force. How that goes now really gets back to the question that we just talked through, which is, how well are we able to connect the Iraqi security forces, their government and the people that will enable some stability -- and not just status quo, but will be able to build on the progress that's being achieved? That really informs -- the results of that effort are what really inform so what kind of force do we need for how much longer, and that is still a very much a work in progress.

And I think to start looking forward and trying to decide what kind of force you could or should have in the spring of '08 is one that the Title 10 side of the Army can probably better address. From

our standpoint, we're not -- it's not clear to us yet what we'll have to ask for, and so it's -- it would be difficult for me to really address it beyond that.

So I would answer that by saying we're still building our own assessment. There's still so much progress under way, and there's still so much work ahead of us. It really wouldn't be worth our time too much to try to speculate. In the next few months, we'll have a much better understanding of how this is going to play out and what their capacity's going to be.

A lot of it isn't just about security either, as you know. A lot of it will depend on how much progress the Iraqis are able to make on the legislative front, on the political front and on an economic front because a great deal of the challenge that we deal with here can be related to, if not attributed to, the challenging economic situation. The more jobs we create, the more respect that we can restore to the lives of young Arab males, the less inclined they're going to be to associate themselves with this insurgency.

So that's how we're looking at it, and there's a lot of progress under way, but still more that needs to be made before we could make an assessment to talk to the level of forces in the future.

Q All right. Thank you, General.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Charlie Quidnunc.

Q Yes, this is Charlie Quidnunc with Whizbang. General, I have a question. I listened to your press conference earlier today, and the press seemed very skeptical that al Qaeda was responsible for all this violence. And in a lot of the press back in the United States there's more skepticism that is, in fact, al Qaeda, that this is some sort of a Pentagon conspiracy to link all this violence to al Qaeda, but it's really not al Qaeda. How do you respond to those kind of criticisms?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, that is really very interesting, and I mean, when you live this and you see it up close, it's absolutely evident and it's very real. And I guess I would also -- I'd also say that at no time in my press conference and no time in our discussions have we said that all of this violence is attributed to al Qaeda.

We have said that al Qaeda is the principal threat to Iraq in the near term. And specifically they're fueling sectarian violence and they're -- these spectacular attacks, which are so destabilizing.

So that doesn't suggest that there isn't a range of other actors out there. We talked last week in great detail about what the Lebanese Hezbollah that is being used as surrogates by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Qods Force operatives here, specifically to train, equip, organize and then guide sometimes the employment of these special groups. So, I mean --

Q Yeah, that was very effective. That was a very effective

conversation. I noticed Michael Ware used it in the Sunday shows with -- describing the influence of Iran. That message has gotten out effectively.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah, well, I guess I would just go back to that to say we've actually been very forthright in explaining the role that those groups are having. And they are an increasing problem and they're one that we are -- that are having an increasingly destabilizing effect on both the government of Iraq as well as creating more problems for us to have to deal with.

So no one would suggest that it's a monolithic threat. But there is no question that that one, al Qaeda, is the principal fueler of sectarian violence and spectacular attacks. And you can tell by their own propaganda and their own messaging that they're doing that it is central to them. I mean, that's kind of -- they're describing themselves in their own words.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Michael Goldfarb.

Q Yeah, I'd like to follow up on that question, I guess. The New York Times ran this piece on Sunday, quoted Anthony Cordesman saying, even when you talk about al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, the idea somehow that it is the center of the insurgency is almost absurd.

So I just wondered, do you view it as the center of the insurgency? And if so, do you view al Qaeda in Iraq as essentially the same as al Qaeda otherwise? Do you view this as essentially -- I mean, is there -- what's the level of command and control here? What's the connection with al Qaeda in Afghanistan or Pakistan?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah, right, well, there's -- I don't think there's any question but that the al Qaeda senior leadership that's running the network is exercising influence over the al Qaeda in Iraq efforts. In fact, al Qaeda in Iraq has continued to be run, administered, overseen by foreigners in large measure.

And so there is a strong linkage between al Qaeda senior leadership and what they are trying to generate in terms of jihadist activity, much like I described the Zawahiri video earlier. That's very real, it's very distinct.

Now, there is no question but that these organizations in Iraq use a cellular structure. They use that to insulate themselves. They use that to make themselves less vulnerable, and they frequently will decide their targeting, their specific actions on a local cellular basis. Sometimes that will also be responsive to the guidance or direction of a regional leader, of a regional emir or a citywide emir who is directing certain priorities or certain types of attacks to take place.

We shouldn't confuse the fact that they are -- the cellular nature of these organizations and these networks doesn't necessarily make them independent. It means that they are using that to reduce their vulnerability, and they -- it doesn't dispute their freedom of action. But it also doesn't say that they are independent of al Qaeda, that they are not influenced by al Qaeda. In fact, what we see from Zawahiri's video is frustration on the part of the al Qaeda senior leadership, and he talks about his frustration about disunity and about conspiracies and about discord. They are trying to undermine the -- they are trying to generate more unity and trying to counter the effect that we're seeing with these Awakening Councils and Support Councils.

So I think that's the best way I could describe it. And I don't think, as I said before -- nobody is suggesting this is a monolithic threat; it's not. But there is no question if you look at the U.S. intelligence agencies, if you look at how the government of Iraq looks at the security problems, and then you see how al Qaeda itself describes their efforts and their vision for Iraq, there's quite a bit of congruence there in terms of the reality al Qaeda has in Iraq.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And someone joined us late. Who was that?

Q That's Jarred Fishman, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Jarred, do you have a question?

Q Yes, sir. Good afternoon, General. My question is with the Washington clock rapidly reaching zero in the capital, how can we ensure that a civil war isn't going to break out in four months when our troops start retreating because of congressional mandates?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, Jarred, I guess I would say, first of all, when I talk to Iraqis, the Iraqi people don't describe the situation they're in in those terms. They are concerned about the sectarian violence, they're concerned about the need to improve security in their neighborhoods. But even amidst all the turmoil, especially the turmoil that you read about, the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi people on a local level and the government, particularly on a local level, is -- are finding increasing ways to work together.

That's what we see in Anbar province, it's what we see in Ramadi, it's what we see in parts of Baghdad. And so there is a commitment among the people to look to their government and the security forces to deal with the problems they're having.

Secondly, the presence of the coalition force and our mission and mandate are something, you know, that -- those decisions get made back in Washington and so we all understand that, and we all understand the nature of a democratic government, the policy and strategy decisions that are made back there. But for here on the ground what we're doing and the importance that we're having right

now, it's particularly an important moment because we're just three weeks into this surge of operations and the offensive effort that's under way, and we'll see how that plays out in the coming months. And we'll get a better sense of how the Iraqi people and their government and security forces step up in these places once we remove the safe havens and reduce some of these operating bases.

But our sense is that our continued presence here is very important to sustaining the progress, and it's just a question of how much the Iraqi security forces can generate the effort and the Iraqi people can step up that would allow us to over time hand things over.

One of the encouraging signs there and one of the things that people sometimes don't appreciate is both the Iraqi government, the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi people very much want to assume the increasing responsibility for security, and in many cases they don't want us to leave. When General Petraeus went up to Baqubah the other day, he said the most frequent thing he was told was people were looking for some assurance from us that we weren't going to leave, that we would stay with them and make sure that we helped them see this through.

So they do want to assume responsibility, but they are actually appreciative of the improvement that we're helping generate with them. And they are concerned about a precipitous departure on the part of the coalition.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you very much, sir.

Any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, I have one, Jack. Do we have time?

MR. HOLT: Sure. Yes.

Q Okay. Thank you. General, Andrew Lubin again from ON Point. This has been a really tremendous and impressive informational package you've presented today, both on the Pentagon Channel and right now, and I know we all appreciate it.

You've got a variety of politicians strolling through the last couple weeks and I'm sure in the future, and I'm sure you've given them the same information and even more.

Then they come back here and they say we got to get out immediately. What's the disconnect? What are we -- what are they missing that we don't seem to be?

GEN. BERGNER: (Chuckles.) Andrew, you're setting me up here.

Q No, I'm just -- I mean, I listen to Olympia Snowe and Pete Domenici and everybody else, and thinking to myself, Jesus, we should -- we're doing their job.

GEN. BERGNER: Well, we really do value this interaction. And I

think one of the observations I would make is, you-all follow this story very closely, and you follow it to the point that you can understand the nuance and the sophistication and the complexity of some of the issues here. Those of us that live over here understand those same levels of detail because this is our lives. And I would say that it's difficult for folks who don't serve over here or who don't follow the issues as closely as you guys do to truly appreciate and understand all of that.

And so I have great empathy, actually. I mean, this is a hard thing to understand, and it is complex. It is -- it is a dynamic environment. When I explain it to my kids at home, they're both brilliant, really smart young people, and it's hard for them to appreciate and understand it.

Q But when you're talking to Olympia Snowe or Joe Lieberman and you talk about AQI, do their eyes roll back, or what don't they understand?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, I'm not the -- I'm probably not the guy to address that question because I actually have not interacted with any of the congressional leaders lately. So I really -- I'm sure that -- I mean, they're all dedicated and loyal and great servants of our country. I have just great respect for them.

So I really can't address the question beyond that. I have great respect for them all, and I don't have the sense that you do, so I don't really know how to respond to it.

Q Okay. Again, I wasn't trying to set you up, but it's just frustrating when I listen to this and read what you've done, and then I listen to people on the TV all the time.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

GEN. BERGNER: Jack, I appreciate everybody's time. I have a hard a hard stop here at 6:30 local time. I really just wanted a moment to say thanks to everybody. I learn a lot from you guys in these conversations. I really value it a great deal. So I thank you for what you're doing and for the chance to interact with you.

Thank you guys very much.

Q Thank you.

Q General, thanks a lot.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much.

Brigadier General Kevin Bergner with us on the Bloggers Roundtable today. Thank you, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: Thanks, Jack. Q Jack, thanks a lot.

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